The Sunday of the Congregational Vote on
a Joint Development and Air Rights Proposal
June 13, 2004

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Fourth Presbyterian Church

We have before us today—the members of this congregation do—a major responsibility and a very important decision to make.

After the 11:00 a.m. worship service, there will be a congregational meeting to vote on a proposal to sell air rights over the western portion of our property and to enter a joint development project to construct a high-rise condominium building behind this building and provide the church significant new resources for our future, our mission, and our financial stability.

It is part of a strategic plan, a vision for the future of Fourth Presbyterian Church, a vision that we have called Project Light, which, starting seven years ago, has received the input, leadership, and love of literally hundreds and hundreds of the members of the congregation.

The component parts of Project Light include:

> The construction of a new building behind this precious 1914 church: 65,000 square feet of classrooms for children and youth; adult seminar rooms; a 300-seat chapel for weddings, memorial services, special worship services, and recitals; and a marvelous new open, airy gathering space, or hub.
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> In addition, a new Michigan Avenue entrance will be added to the Manse, which will become a welcome center, an open door to busy Michigan Avenue, and a renovated kitchen on the lower level.
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> That project will provide the space we need now and for the foreseeable future.
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> The second part of Project Light is an addition to the church's endowment to support our mission and program in the future.
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> Third, a gift of $1 million to McCormick Theological Seminary, an institution with which Fourth Presbyterian Church has a long and important relationship.
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> Fourth, a mission initiative on Chicago Avenue in the exciting new urban neighborhood west of here. We have been a presence and positive

> resource for the families and children of Cabrini-Green for forty years. And now, as that neighborhood undergoes transformation, many Cabrini residents will remain and be joined by new home owners. We can be a bridge, a symbol of community, a place for recreation and learning and job training and socialization. So we have purchased a piece of property, and our vision includes the construction of a community center.

What the congregation will vote on today is a plan to provide part of the financial support for this vision.

The first and basic part of the support strategy is the gifts of the people, your Capital Campaign pledges. We are pleased with where we are, but we aren't done yet and that campaign will continue.

The second part of the support strategy is the sale of air rights over the new building behind us, to a real estate development corporation that will construct, over our building, a high-rise condominium.

That is what we will vote on today.

It is an important day in the life of this church.

If you are visiting with us this morning, we apologize for burdening you with our family business, and we do sincerely seek your prayers for this church in the days ahead.

I will moderate the meeting as the Presbyterian Constitution provides.

But now I want to speak personally, particularly to those who are the members of this congregation, which called me nineteen years ago to be your pastor.

This church is a precious gift given to us by those who came before us. No one knows that more powerfully and personally than I do. It is ours for a few years, to manage as wisely and faithfully as we can, to hand over to those who will come after us. And so I—we—have heard from a lot of you recently, on all sides of this issue. That is good. I treasure and respect your opinions and convictions even when you are not happy with me.

I have heard from neighbors who do not want another high-rise building here, and I value and respect those convictions as well.

And the press has paid attention with prominent pictures and stories. There is something irresistible about this: a church doing something new and controversial; neighbors protesting; church members arguing; city

agencies, neighborhood organizations, church officers, people outside handing out literature—irresistible!

In the middle of it all last week, one of many e-mails struck me deeply.

A member and friend said something like this: “I’m not sure how I’m going to vote, but John, please don’t say I’m voting against God if I vote no.”

That I will not do. I love Presbyterianism too much for that. Our system of church government, our way of being church, is an orderly process that invites everyone to participate, to speak, to care passionately about Jesus Christ and his church, and to vote.

It was my great honor to serve as the Moderator of the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) during a time of deep division and disagreement, and I know and treasure the unity of the church which transcends differences of opinion, even ones that are passionately held.

I do believe in the proposal before us. I believe it is thoughtful and hopeful and creative. I happen to love tall buildings that make a city graceful and energetic. I believe the proposal represents a faithful use of a resource that is ours.

But I do not believe you are voting against God if you do not agree with me.

What is really precious and important about us—you and me, all of us—is that our unity is based on our love for God, our trust in Jesus Christ, and our belief in the church as the Body of Christ on earth.

What is really important and precious about us today is that you and I are privileged to be part of this singular, extraordinary church, this congregation of God, people striving to do what is right and to be—for all the days ahead—a light in the city.

So at the end of this day, however this thing comes out, let us not think about winners and losers but about the church and its mission. And I ask you to reach out to one another, specifically across whatever space there is between differing opinions and convictions. Shake hands, venture a hug even, and join me in a prayer of gratitude for this great church and this great moment.

O God, we commend to you this congregation on this important day.
We give you thanks and pray for all its members,
here and scattered throughout the country and world.
We give you thanks and pray for our neighbors and friends
with whom we share life in this community.

Bless us, O God, with your gifts of wisdom,
patience with one another, and grace.
And startle us now, with your truth in Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is the truth and the way and the life,
and in whose name we pray. Amen.